

INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION

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Return To:

SUMMARY OF REPLIES TO RECENT SELECTED MIS INQUIRIES

What kinds of inquiries does MIS receive from officials of subscribing cities, and what replies have been made by MIS on some subjects of general interest?

One of the most important features of MIS, since it was established seven years ago, is the prompt handling of inquiries received by mail, telegraph, or telephone from officials of subscribing cities. Replies to these inquiries usually summarize best practices, indicate trends, and often contain specific suggestions for action by city officials. In addition, books, pamphlets, and other reference materials often are loaned to the city from the extensive files accumulated by the International City Managers' Association.

Many of these inquiries are of general interest to most city officials. In order to give all MIS subscribers the benefit of information on a wider range of subjects, this report presents brief abstracts of some of the answers given to questions received during 1952. Subjects covered in this report are:

Council Approval of Bills	Housing Conversions
Employee Suggestion Systems	Water Department Public Relations
Storm Drainage Policies	Residential Development in Industrial Areas
Callable Bonds--Pro and Con	Mediation for City Employees
Hospital Boards	One-way Streets
Courtesy Traffic Tickets	Providing Police Payroll Escorts
Police Patrol Methods	Time Out for Coffee

Council Approval of Bills

In too many cities the city council feels that it must review and pass in detail on bills to be paid by the city during any given week or month. This is especially true in commission and mayor-council cities and is a practice that encourages the council to spend its time on petty details instead of on broad matters of financial policy. In other works, the council should devote its limited time to more important city affairs. In a majority of council-manager cities, however, the council does not do this detail work because a budget has been adopted after careful study, and that budget is authorization to incur certain expenditures subject to administrative regulations laid down by the city manager. This is based on the idea and practice that authorization of the budget by the council permits the city manager or other official acting under his direction to incur obligations which are legally binding on the city. Therefore there is no object in having bills approved by the council.

Employee Suggestion Systems

A vast amount of material has been written on employee suggestion systems, especially for private industry. Questions still arise, however, as to the practicality of such plans and their possible application to government service. Three of these questions were raised by one city recently and are answered here in summary form.

A suggestion system probably is more effective in improving employee relations and morale than in improving efficiency and economy in measurable amounts. Many believe, however, that this means of interesting employees in their jobs tends to identify them with the self interest of the organization as well as with their personal self interest. This indirectly, at least, brings greater efficiency at less cost. In any event, employees are likely to be motivated by the chance for recognition as well as financial reward.

Suggestion systems can result in a measurable saving in money. Some spectacular examples have occurred in the state of New York where a suggestion system program for state employees has been in effect for some time.

Who should administer the suggestion program? The answer is the director of personnel in cities having personnel departments and the city manager or chief administrator in other cities. Definite responsibility must be assigned for placing the suggestion boxes, making periodic collections, investigating the suggestions, and announcing the results. Experience in private industry has shown that responsibility for recommending for or against a suggestion should rest with a suggestion committee, and that the chief administrator should have final authority for acceptance or rejection. Such a committee probably should be selected from the lower levels of management authority. "Top brass" has no place here. The suggestion system ordinances of San Diego, California, and Kansas City, Missouri, follow this plan.

Experience in both public and private employment has shown at least four elements absolutely essential for a good suggestion system: (1) active endorsement of top officials including the willingness to give suggestions reasonable trial; (2) frequent publicizing of suggestions and notices of awards; (3) prompt recognition of good suggestions and personal explanation to employees whose suggestions are unacceptable (the form letter has no place here); and (4) willingness to accept workable suggestions even if they are not wholly developed from a technical standpoint.

Storm Drainage Policies

The city council of a southern city wisely decided that its policies for financing and installing storm drainage systems should be reviewed. In reply to the city manager it was pointed out that certain principles should be followed in revising that city's policies:

1. The city should furnish and install all pipe or tile.
2. All storm drainage should be placed underground in the interest of public health and safety. An exception can be made for major water courses that carry sufficient normal flow to be self-cleaning. In the long run, however, the cost of maintaining open channels exceeds that of putting the drainage underground.
3. Property owners should pay the proportionate cost of installing drainage facilities. Taxpayers at the upper end of a drainage system, for example, where small diameter pipe is required, should help to defray the difference in cost of the larger diameter pipe required at the lower end of the system. The city should share in the cost to the extent of runoff from the streets. This principle of proportionate sharing of cost also can be applied to capital improvements, such as retaining walls and culverts, carried in easements across private property.

Callable Bonds--Pro and Con

A city was recently planning a large serial bond issue to mature over 20 years and inquired as to whether they should abandon their custom of issuing noncallable bonds. It was pointed out that the call feature does not bring much advantage except in the outside chance that the city should become prosperous enough to retire the entire issue ahead of the ultimate maturity date. Early retirement of the issue, of course, saves interest charges.

On the other hand the call privilege should always be used when it does not cost anything extra. The call feature would be detrimental if the bonds had to be sold at a considerable premium because of the call feature. For many issues, however, this is not likely to be the case. The finance director of one large city, for example, asks for bids with both call and noncall features and then compares the prices. On one of their recent issues he found practically no difference in bids, and therefore the bonds were issued with the call feature. The various arguments on call-bonds--pro and con--are set forth in "The Call Feature in Municipal Bonds" (Chicago: Municipal Finance Officers Association, 1938).

Hospital Boards

Time and again the question is raised as to the advantage of administration by a board as opposed to a single head. The question has been raised for library, public works, health, welfare, recreation, planning, personnel, assessment, utilities, and most recently, for the municipal hospital.

In general a hospital board is independent of the city council after it is appointed, often too independent. The council has little or no control over hospital operations since the board determines major operating policies and prepares its own budget which the city council is expected to adopt without change. When the board appoints the hospital superintendent, the city council and the chief administrator are too far removed from responsible control. Boards should be avoided wherever possible for the administration of any municipal government activity.

If a compromise has to be made, then the hospital board should be advisory only and its scope of action should be strictly limited in the council resolution that establishes the board. Even an advisory board is questionable because such boards on a continuing basis may have hard-working members who feel that they should have more and more authority and responsibility for hospital operations. This does not preclude the real value of advisory boards that are created for a specific purpose or to make a specific study. Such boards can meet often as necessary to do immediate and well-defined jobs and then are disbanded upon completion of their work.

Courtesy Traffic Tickets

A number of cities are using "courtesy" traffic tickets for parking violations committed by out-of-city or out-of-state drivers. Such a ticket usually contains a friendly warning to the motorist not to repeat the violation, points out the applicable parking regulations, and extends the welcome of the city to the motorist. Such "courtesy" tickets for out-of-town drivers generally are not desirable. When parking regulations are clearly posted, excusing out-of-towners has a tendency to develop an attitude that they are somehow above the law. Such immunity has the further and very direct effect of defeating the purpose for which parking regulations are established--either to keep streets clear for movement of traffic or to facilitate turnover of parked cars in congested commercial districts. There is little reason why an out-of-towner cannot observe traffic regulations in the same manner as residents.

Police Patrol Methods

The controversies on one-man patrol cars vs. two-man cars and on foot patrol vs. motorized patrol continue in many cities. On the question of one-man vs. two-man cars, no answer can be given in absolute terms but rather must be expressed by giving weight to the character of the city, its population, crime rate, housing and street pattern, concentration of crime in certain areas, and other factors. It can reasonably be said that one-man cars are not used nearly to the extent they should be in most cities.

Almost all foot patrolmen in most cities can be replaced by auto patrol with greater effectiveness of patrol coverage and economy in operation. In the largest cities some foot patrolmen are necessary to check the security of business houses and to perform other inspectional work. Even here, however, auto patrol should be used for most areas. The argument arises over the failure of the public and the police to understand that a motorized patrolman is, in fact, nothing more than a foot patrolman provided with transportation and continuous communications with headquarters. The motorized patrolman not only handles all incidents reported to him by radio but also performs all of the duties of a foot patrolman within his area. Better police service will be provided when police administrators charge the motorized patrolman with responsibility for all police work on his beat and stop thinking of a radio patrol car only as a vehicle for dealing with emergencies.

Housing Conversions

Planning and zoning boards in a number of cities are being petitioned for permission to convert large single-family dwelling units into apartments. Neighboring home owners always oppose this move, but action sometimes has to be taken because large old houses have almost no sale value with today's costs of maintenance, taxes, insurance, and upkeep.

With proper control, these houses can be converted into apartments so as to permit gradual change in the characteristics of a neighborhood. The Colorado Springs, Colorado, zoning ordinance attempts to meet this problem while still preserving the desirable characteristics of space, light, and ventilation. Single-family houses can be converted provided the exterior characteristics are not changed, a minimum of 2,500 square feet of lot space is provided for each dwelling unit, each unit consists of not less than two and one-half rooms with separate bath and kitchen facilities, and that one parking space is provided for each unit. An ordinance in Montclair, New Jersey, carries this a step further and provides that homes to be converted must have reached a certain age so as to allow for gradual change of residential neighborhoods.

Water Department Public Relations

A city manager wrote in describing a problem of poor public relations in the city water department. The problem was intensified because the city's rates were higher than those of neighboring cities and because of the inability of the water department to provide fast and prompt service to newly developed neighborhoods in outlying parts of the city. What could be done about the situation?

The MIS reply suggested several approaches while stressing the importance of in-service public relations training for all public contact employees, including meter readers and servicemen. Public contact employees for a water department fall in two groups, those who spend their time in the office and those who spend most of their time outside reading meters and doing service jobs. Both groups need public relations training.

Such a training program need not be elaborate nor very formal. Three or four one to two-hour meetings usually are enough, with those responsible for meeting the public doing most of the work by suggesting ways of handling disagreeable persons and ways that such people can be helped. Films on telephone courtesy can be borrowed from the local telephone company. The movie "As Others See Us" (available from the British Information Service, Rockefeller Plaza, New York) is an excellent film for changing employee attitudes toward the public.

Residential Development in Industrial Areas

A city planning commission recently was redrafting its zoning ordinance and raised the question of prohibiting the intrusion of residential buildings into areas zoned for industry and manufacturing. This a good step in preventing the development of slums, and the MIS reply discussed two factors involved in a prohibition of this kind. The first is that the boundaries of the industrial zones should be realistic; thus they should be large enough to accommodate all such industrial development as can be expected in the reasonable future but not so large as to encourage real estate subdividers to try to break the ordinance.

The second factor is that of educating potential builders to the undesirability of locating residences in industrial zones. Noise, dirt, traffic, parking, etc. make such locations undesirable for housing and the value of such housing may be destroyed by the later influx of industrial development. The future value of the land for industrial building, on the other hand, is seriously impaired if the land is chopped up by residences which also require schools, churches, and commercial areas.

Mediation for City Employees

A few cities have expressed interest in a plan of mediation or arbitration for settling employee disputes. Arbitration commonly implies having the dispute settled by an individual or a board operating in a quasi-judicial capacity and with authority to make a decision binding on both parties. Only one city in the United States (Detroit) is known to have adopted arbitration for labor disputes. There the firemen two years ago were successful in getting a charter amendment passed requiring arbitration of disputes between the fire department and the city officials on pay and personnel matters. The idea so far as city government is concerned is not sound because it sets up one more special board, beyond the reach of the city council or the voters, with authority to set policies and even, on salary questions, to say how much money the city shall spend.

Mediation, which is advisory rather than authoritative, has been tried with some success in Toledo, Louisville, and Denver. These places have relied on citizen interest and broad representation on the boards in order to encourage the parties to settle their differences in a friendly way.

One-Way Streets

One-way streets invariably speed up traffic and save wear and tear both on the car and driver. In recent years many cities have adopted a one-way street plan for the downtown business district, for certain arterial streets, and for other streets that are too narrow to comfortably carry two lanes of traffic. Downtown merchants usually have opposed the plan at the outset, but no city is known to have abandoned the plan after trying it for a while. Rather the one-way street plan usually has been extended to more and more streets.

It is not difficult to sell the public on the desirability of one-way streets. The important consideration is that all citizens be fully informed in advance of the streets which are to be made one-way, and for the first week or two the plan is in effect that police officers should warn drivers until people get used to the change. The miles of one-way streets in 477 cities over 10,000 population are shown in the 1952 Municipal Year Book (pp. 454-463).

Providing Police Payroll Escorts

Many cities are called on to provide a police escort for payroll money and for money being transferred between banks and other buildings. Cities usually furnish this service without charge, but they are concerned because of the cost to the city for this service. The trend in recent years has been for police departments to discontinue providing special services as far as possible, including payroll escorts, funeral processions, and special details at athletic contests and other public events. Police specialists generally recommend that these special details be discontinued. Business concerns that want special police services for escorting payrolls or for other services should secure the help of private agencies. As an alternative, cities can consider establishing a charge for these services that approximates the cost.

Time Out for Coffee

The "coffee break" for workers in private offices and industrial plants has gained rather wide acceptance since the war and has spread to many government office buildings. The practice developed first in assembly line plants where the need for a short break midway through a shift was important to prevent fatigue and accidents. Inevitably the coffee break extended to offices, shops, and other areas, until employees began to regard it as a right, not a privilege.

In cities where the coffee break has become an institution, it is wise to accept the fact and to prepare a few simple guidelines for employee conduct. The time should be limited to 10 or 15 minutes, and employees should stagger their time off so that offices are always covered. For public works crews and other outside workers, one man can bring coffee for the entire crew so that they don't all leave the job. It is especially important to avoid giving an impression to the public that city employees have nothing to do but sit around, drink coffee, and gossip.